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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of students' ethnicity on measures of the meaning of success in school and a preference for school feedback. A questionnaire was distributed to 333 white American students in eastern Wisconsin and 375 Hong Kong Chinese 8th- through 12-graders. Results showed a significantly higher proportion of American than Chinese students ranked "getting good grades" or "doing as well as or better than others in your class" as most important among five measures of the meaning of success, whereas a significantly higher proportion of Chinese than American students ranked "behaving well" as most important. A significantly higher proportion of American than Chinese students ranked "your grades on tests and assignments" as the most important among five measures of preference for school feedback, whereas a significantly higher proportion of Chinese than American students ranked "you are able to do better and better" or "how hard you work" as most important. The results suggest that the Chinese cultural values that place an emphasis on effort and self-improvement may be a reason why Chinese students' academic achievement tends to be higher than that of their American peers. (MDM)

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# Some Cultural Differences in Academic Motivational Orientations Between American and Chinese Students*

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Abstract

Effects of students' ethnicity on measures of meaning of success in school and preference for school feedback were investigated with 333 white American and 375 Chinese students. Participants completed a questionnaire anonymously. Results from chi-square tests showed a significantly higher proportion of American than Chinese students ranked "getting good grades" or "doing as well as or better than others in your class" as most important among five measures of meaning of success while a significantly higher proportion of Chinese than American students ranked "behaving well" as most important. A significantly higher proportion of American than Chinese students ranked "your grades on tests and assignments" as most important among five measures of preference for school feedback while a significantly higher proportion of Chinese than American students ranked "you are able to do better and better" or "how hard you work" as most important. The implications of these findings are discussed.

# Some Cultural Differences in Academic Motivational Orientations Between American and Chinese Students

Researchers in the area of achievement motivation and behavior have emphasized the importance of the cultural background of the individual achievers. Specifically, Martin Maehr and his colleagues (Fyans, Salili, Maehr, & Desai, 1983; Maehr, 1978; Maehr & Braskamp, 1986; Maehr & Nicholls, 1980) have argued that achievement motivation and behavior must be understood within the individual achiever's cultural context. This is the case because individuals from different cultures tend to attach different meanings to any given achievement situation or behavior, thereby affecting their achievement-related efforts.

Aspects of students' academic motivational orientations, specifically, "meaning of success" in school and "preference for school feedback," have been examined with American students by researchers and reported in the literature (Ames & Archer, 1987, 1988). Whether students' cultural background was related to these aspects of academic motivational orientations remained to be documented. The purpose of this study was to determine if students' cultural background, defined in terms of students' ethnicity, was related to "meaning of success" in school and "preference for school feedback."

In cross-national comparisons on academic achievement, Chinese students consistently were found to outperform their

American peers (Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Lummis, Stigler, Fan, & Ge, 1990; Stevenson, Stigler, Lee, Lucker, Kitamura, & Hsu, 1985). For this reason, the comparative study of Chinese and American students might prove to be interesting and profitable in understanding the cultural origins of motivation and achievement.

## Method

Participants. Students from 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade classes in an urban area in eastern Wisconsin and from the corresponding grades in Hong Kong were recruited for participation in the study. The American sample consisted of 333 participants. The ethnicity of all of these participants was White, non-Hispanic. The Chinese sample consisted of 375 participants. In both samples, there was a roughly equal number of boys and girls and students from the three grade levels.

Material. Each student was asked to respond anonymously to a questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire asked students to provide demographic information about themselves (e.g., gender, age, parental education, ethnicity). The second part of the questionnaire asked the students to respond to the dependent measures.

Dependent Measures. The dependent measures in this study have been used in previous published studies. Specifically, "meaning of success" in school was measured by asking students to rank order the following in terms of their importance for themselves: getting good grades,

working hard, behaving well (getting along with others and following rules), doing as well as or better than others in their class, and doing better and better (showing improvement).

"Preference for school feedback" was measured by asking students to rank order the importance of the following information about their school performance for themselves: their grades on tests and assignments, how well they do compared to the average of their class, they are able to do better and better, how well they do compared to other students in their class, and how hard they work.

Procedure. The questionnaire was administered to the students in their classrooms by the author, who was previously unknown to the students. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers and the best answers would be those that honestly and accurately reflect their true thoughts and feelings. The students responded to the questionnaire anonymously and were debriefed about the purpose of the study when they were all completed.

## Results

Results from the chi-square test on the five measures of meaning of success showed that a significantly higher proportion of American than Chinese students ranked "getting good grades (46% vs. 32%)" or "doing as well as or better than others in your class (18% vs. 9%)" as most important among the five measures. A significantly higher proportion of Chinese than American students, on the other hand, ranked

"behaving well" as most important among the five measures (8% vs. 22%).

Results from the chi-square test on the five measures of preference for school feedback showed that a significantly higher proportion of American than Chinese students ranked "your grades on tests and assignments" as most important among the five measures (51% vs. 31%). A significantly higher proportion of Chinese than American students, on the other hand, ranked "you are able to do better and better (16% vs. 29%)" or "how hard you work (25% vs. 33%)" as most important among the five measures.

## Discussion

These findings thus indicate that the cultural background of students is related to the two measures of academic motivational orientations. While the exact reasons for these cultural differences in the measures of meaning of success and preference for school feedback between American and Chinese students may not be easy to pinpoint, one may speculate that these cultural differences might be attributed to differences in cultural values and practices experienced by students between these two cultures. As many writers (e.g., Chen & Uttal, 1988; Ho, 1981; Lum & Char, 1985; Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Lummis, Stigler, Fan, & Ge, 1990; Huang, 1976) have noted, the Chinese culture traditionally has emphasized the importance of education and personal cultivation. Education is considered important by the Chinese because it is fundamental to their belief in

human malleability and is an important means of self-cultivation, or self-improvement, which is an important Chinese cultural value (see, e.g., Chen & Uttal, 1988; Ho, 1981). Chinese children are taught from an early age on that good behavior, studying hard, and a high level of educational achievement are an important form of self-improvement. They are taught that one's ultimate level of achievement is attained through one's efforts and they thus learn that improving their school performance is within their control (Chen & Uttal, 1988; Hess, Chang, & McDevitt, 1987). Chinese parents set high standards of academic achievement for their children and believe that teachers are more important than parents in influencing their children's academic performance (Chen & Uttal, 1988; Stevenson, Lee, Chen, Lummis, Stigler, Fan, & Ge, 1990). This emphasis on effort, self-improvement, and the role of the teacher probably helps to explain why Chinese children are more likely than their American peers to choose "behaving well" as most important among the five measures of meaning of success and "you are able to do better and better" or "how hard you work" as most important among the five measures of preference for school feedback. These cultural differences in students' belief in "behaving well," "your are able to do better and better," and "how hard you work" may be one reason why Chinese students tend to outperform their American peers in school achievement. The educational implications of these findings seem to be that in motivating

American students, one might consider an increased emphasis on good behavior and a desire to do better and better and to work hard in school.

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Table 1

Some Cultural Differences Between American And Chinese Students

| Measure | American (n=333) | Chinese (n=375) | Chi-Square[a] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Meaning of Success | | | |
| Getting good grades | 46% | 32% | 15.06*** |
| Doing as well as or better than others in your class | 18% | 9% | 4.34* |
| Behaving well | 8% | 22% | 27.52*** |
| Preference for School Feedback | | | |
| Your grades on tests and assignments | 51% | 31% | 31.34*** |
| You are able to do better and better | 16% | 29% | 17.29*** |
| How hard you work | 25% | 33% | 5.73* |

[a] df=1, N=708.

*p < .05. ***p < .001.